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ABSTRACT

Career counseling in middle and high schools should be tailored to the unique characteristics of adolescents during those tumultuous years when they begin to learn more about themselves. Establishing a rapport and building a relationship are key first steps for school counselors working with adolescents and their career aspirations. Individuals and counselors often find that navigating career information can be both complicated and time consuming. The National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC), together with the state Occupational Coordinating Committees (SOICCs), contributes an Internet database of information and links to other sites that further enhance career knowledge. The North Carolina SOICC, in collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Commission on Workforce Preparedness/Job Ready, has been in the process of integrating CX-Online into schools statewide since 1997. This digest provides suggestions for how to get started with a computer-based counseling program, how to use CX-Online daily, and how to keep the program going year-to-year. (MKA)

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Let's Go Surfing:

Use of the Internet for Career Counseling in the Schools

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Overview

Career counseling in middle and high school should be tailored to the unique characteristics of adolescents during those tumultuous years when they begin to learn more about themselves. Part of the adolescent's search for identity is the keen desire to explore interests, abilities, and new experiences, and to find satisfaction. Many are facing for the first time a complex decision about the reality of work in relation to their own lives. Sorting through information useful for making informed decisions about one's life is crucial to the process. However, information is exploding in every area of life. Adolescents and the school professionals who help them have the arduous task of deciphering a mountain of data during their pursuit of career goals and dreams. Useful and user-friendly interactive computer programs exist that can guide students, parents, and counselors through the vast and complicated world of career information.

Establishing rapport and building a relationship are key first steps for school counselors working with adolescents and their career aspirations. Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz (1999) proposed that career counselors adopt a "planned happenstance" (p. 116) approach whereby the counselor helps clients "generate, recognize, and incorporate" (p. 117) chance events into their career development. Rather than waiting for life to happen to them, students should be challenged to prepare for the unplanned so that action can be taken when the unexpected happens. With its unlimited volume of data, the Internet is a place where adolescents may experience the unexpected and, with help, can make use of the information gathered.

Individuals and counselors often find that navigating career information can be both complicated and time consuming. Though access to career information can be obtained through traditional sources like the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (go to www.onetcenter.org) or the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (go to http://stats.bls.gov/ocohome.htm), these are only the beginning of a thorough career research, planning, and decision making process. CX-Online (Bridges, Inc., 2000), in use throughout the United States and Canada, offers an extensive and interactive framework allowing students, teachers, and counselors to connect career information to interests and education. The temptation when logging onto the Internet is to jump from site to site, seeking just the right information. The beauty of this program is that once students have used some of the basic tools, links are provided that are an appropriate match for their research. The content of CX-Online is written in a style that appeals to adolescents, with new information appearing daily. Articles not only cover basic education, salary, and outlook but also contain interviews with people working in those careers featured each day. Professionals (teachers) also can benefit from use of a variety of lesson plans and activities for use in the classroom.

The National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC) together with is state counterparts, the State Occupational Coordinating Committees (SOICCs), accessible on the Internet, contribute a base of information and links to other sites that further enhance career knowledge (go to www.noicc.gov). The North Carolina SOICC, in collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Commission on Workforce Preparedness/Job Ready, has been in the process of integrating CX-Online into schools statewide since 1997. Below are suggestions of how to get started, how to use CX-Online daily, and how to keep the program year-to-year are offered. The potential is ever growing and ever changing, just like the Internet.

Getting Started

Any computer-based counseling program implies the availability of computers, either individually in the counseling office or classroom, or as part of a computer lab. Student and professional access to these computers will influence effectiveness of CX-Online (or other programs). Training is also an issue. In North Carolina, regional, semi-annual training is provided for counselors. And then, too, user experience and competence with computers as well as time constraints must also be evaluated.

Typically, staff members (teachers, administrators, and career specialists) can be introduced to the essentials of CX-Online in about one hour. This introduction would include a preview of the student resources as well as a detailed explanation of the professional part of the program. One middle school in North Carolina provided training during grade-level planning sessions. Attendance was mandatory, with follow-up instruction available on an as-requested basis.

Student Training (or introduction) also takes about one hour. Four research tools (Daily News, Browse, Search, and Interest Inventory) can be discussed during the first half-hour, with particular focus on the first three. The second half-hour can focus on the interest inventory, which then provides links to specific career descriptions, job opportunities, and interviews with professionals, and even links to college sites that offer the required education. These preliminary sessions typically generate great interest, and can transition easily into more sessions in either the classroom or counseling office setting.

Day-to-Day Use

Inevitably, any new tool or resource generates initial excitement, only to be rarely used or, worse, ignored later. For the most part, CX-Online is hard to ignore, yet there are several ways the school counselor can increase and maintain the program's visibility and use.

Posting the Daily News in the counseling office or teacher workroom/mailroom not only maintains this visibility but also illustrates one of CX-Online's greatest strengths: every day there is new information on the Internet, and every day CX-Online grabs a piece for viewers to use. Providing teachers with the Math or English 'problem of the day' for featured

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careers from the Daily News is another effective practice. This can be accomplished through informal discussions, or by placing copies in teacher mailboxes.

Both of these suggestions imply that the counselor is visiting the CX-Online site very day, which can also lead to another use: individual counseling. Building hope is very therapeutic. For example, a student in ISS (In-School Suspension) could be brought into the counseling office and introduced to one or more aspects of CX-Online. One middle school counselor found a dramatic change of outlook when a student began to visualize his future rather than remaining stuck in the present. Further sessions could become contingent on good behavior (not as an excuse out of ISS!).

Without doubt, with a program tied to the Internet with the depth and breadth of CX-Online, any counselor, student, or teacher would be challenged to utilize all aspects of its aspects. The ever-changing potential of CX-Online must be explored and promoted to ensure availability into the future at each school site.

Keeping CX-Online on a Yearly Basis

As with any good resource, renewal and maintenance must be examined. Summative reviews for administrators that include goals, objectives, and accomplishments are crucial. Will there be funding for renewal of the program? A lot will depend on presentation of accurate, specific, tangible results. Students and teachers could offer experiential reviews, with the counselor adding statistical support. Also, a counselor could offer special orientation/overview sessions in a computer lab for administrators *before* they make final budget decisions for the following school year. The National Career Development Association (NCDA, 1999) has developed guidelines for using the Internet. CX-Online meets or exceeds several of these (delivery of information about occupations, and providing on-line searches of occupational databases are just two). Additionally, NOICC has developed career development competencies which are closely aligned with the components of CX-Online (NOICC, 1988). Incorporating this documentation into summative reports would also enhance program accountability.

Targeting parents as a group could also boost the longevity of the program in a school or district. Offering the same review information either by mail or during a PTA meeting could spark interest and support. Additionally, offering workshops for parents similar to staff and student training would allow even more exposure for the program.

Conclusion

In the end, the school counselor faces the challenge of being the 'expert' who can facilitate the use of any career-counseling program. Though a daunting task due to the vast nature of the Internet and the breadth of CX-Online, few other programs hold such potential to both streamline and ensure the delivery of effective career counseling for students. Every day new information becomes available and, as Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz (1999) have discussed, being prepared for the unexpected promotes individual development and career decision making. Mitchell et al. have encouraged the notion of open-mindedness in their model, which fits well with a program like CX-Online. Who knows what will be discovered tomorrow? The future can become an adventure to look forward to instead of a decision-making time to dread.

Herr & Cramer (1996) warn that "indiscriminate use of the computer may not be appropriate" and that "individuals must be assisted through a variety of techniques to use data in a personally meaningful manner" (p. 642). That said, school counselors are in a significant position to help students access information in a meaningful way. Shedding methods and procedures that are quickly becoming outdated and utilizing the ever-changing sources of information via the Internet depict the nature of the new millennium. Counselors will hear few arguments from adolescents who are eager to explore, question, experiment, and eventually establish themselves in the world.

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